

# The layers under the wordplay of the mouse's tale



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Lewis Carroll has a lot of fun playing with language in *Alice in Wonderland*. He points out its flexibility, inadequacies, and the confusion that it can produce when taken at face value without common sense and interpretation. His playfulness is certainly entertaining and raises points about some interesting quirks of language, but there is often more to the wordplay than the simple jest that Alice and the creatures of Wonderland find in it. There are often multiple levels of meaning. A fun and playful surface layer often uses lighthearted distracting lights and colors to mask a deeper, darker layer which lies beneath it. Since this type of multi-layered wordplay parallels the multiple layers of meaning running throughout the book, deconstructing and examining the mouse's tale, an example of the wordplay, offers a portal through which to view the more serious, darker and subversive messages of the story. There are many puns and busy, colorful images before, after and within the mouse's tale (25) that work to produce the cheery and entertaining mood we are in when we come across the enigmatic poem. Just prior to the telling of the tale, a motley crew of creatures had been running in crazed circles in the "caucus-race" (23). A pun on the word "tale" (24) then follows this very humorous image. The wordplay and the entertaining imagery of the race sets up a cheerful, silly aura for the mouse's tale, and the reader goes into it without expecting deep meaning. Carroll quickly employs another pun (on the word "not/knot" (25)) as soon as the tale is over, whisking the reader along and preventing any dwelling on the darker nature of the mouse's poem. Puns, misunderstandings and other forms of wordplay are rampant throughout the entire story. Puns are inherently fun. The idea of one word conveying two ideas hits a nerve and excites people – especially if the second meaning brings with it a set of images and ideas that

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are surprising and completely incongruous with the other meaning. The puns help to maintain the lighthearted and happy feeling even when not-so-happy things are happening (like the sorrowful singing of the perpetually weeping mock-turtle, or the adamant execution orders from the Queen). As in the scene with the mouse's tale, wordplay and exciting events and images create and sustain a feeling throughout the entire book that there is nothing darker or more subversive than the innocent telling of a young girl's adventures in a make-believe world. In the case of the mouse's tale, puns and silly images are not the only things that contribute to the feeling of levity; other elements combine to enhance this seemingly playful story. The concrete shape of the poem on the page (see page seven of this paper) is of course endearing and distracting. The thought, "How cute! It looks like a tail!" springs to mind. It is difficult to pay close attention to the meaning of a poem when your eyes are wiggling back and forth, reading just two or three words per line. Other poetic elements also enhance the fun feeling, like the merry aab ccb dde ffe rhyme scheme. One pays more attention to the look and sound of the poem than to its meaning. Although Carroll does not write out any other parts of the story in visually descriptive ways, the elaborate and frequent illustrations serve an analogous purpose. The pictures, which are usually humorous, distract the reader and draw attention to the entertaining, funny, and visually exciting aspects of the story, and not to the darker meaning-laden layer beneath the surface. By distracting the reader and diverting attention, these surface elements, full of feeling yet devoid of meaning, effectively conceal the darker side of the poem from those not actively seeking it. They appeal to the casual reader and create a tale that can be enjoyed by all. The pictures coupled with various other instances of

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wordplay and the exciting events that occur carry out a similar duty for the rest of the story. Certainly Alice and the creatures of Wonderland (and presumably most other children as well) do not see past the fun and silly smoke screen of an entertaining and bizarre world. Digging deeper and trying to grasp the true meaning of Carroll's words produces much more disturbing, weightier images that correspond to the darker and more adult-oriented themes. The substance of the mouse's tale, much like many of the themes running through the book, is quite somber. The tale is, in fact, horrible. A dog forces an innocent mouse into an unfair trial in which the rodent will obviously be condemned to death and brutally killed (and very likely eaten). Strong triumphs over weak; evil conquers good. Death is alluded to quite often in the story. Carroll plants the seeds of these unsettling yet real ideas in the heads of children. Kids need not confront them directly yet, but are aware of their shadowy presence. Many nursery rhymes and fairy tales do much the same thing. Carroll gives many events in Alice in Wonderland a similar dual-layer treatment: on the outside, they seem like pure fun and games, while in truth they have a deeper, more adult; sometimes commenting on society, nature and sub-text. Just before the mouse tells his tale, the animals sprint hither and thither in the fantastic caucus-race. The race, which is certainly exciting and bizarre on the one hand, doubles as a sharp satire of England's government: although there is a great commotion, nothing gets accomplished and nobody ends up with anything worth having. In fact, Alice was in a better situation (she had more candies) before the race was run. There are other themes in the mouse's tale that are also found in the sub-layers throughout the story. One of these, which seems a favorite of Carroll's, is the illogicality of many aspects of <https://assignbuster.com/the-layers-under-the-wordplay-of-the-mouses-tale/>

society. He conveys this throughout the book by emphasizing and treating as normal many of the completely illogical things that happen in Wonderland. In the specific case of the mouse's story, a totally illogical scenario occurs. The dog, Fury, wants to play all of the roles in the courtroom. (Interestingly, the mythological Furies stood not only for horrible punishment and cruelty, but also logic and justice. The fact that the dog embodies the first, negative, aspects but is the antithesis of the virtuous components of the Furies' characters compounds the lack of logic in the situation.) As the mouse rightly declares, a trial in which the prosecutor also acts as the judge and the jury is a pointless waste of time. A fair trial could never be produced under such circumstances (25). The mouse's tale is illogical for other reasons as well. The mouse tells the tale as an answer to Alice's question about why he does not like cats and dogs (24). However, the tale does not even mention cats at all, and only describes an episode that occurs with a dog. Logically, if only one of the animals were to be mentioned it would make more sense to talk about a case involving a cat, not a dog. Cats are the infamous foes of mice. Dogs rarely catch them, let alone eat them. Perhaps the animal world (and the rest of the world as well) has been warped by Wonderland in more ways than originally recognized. The illogicality of the mouse's tale mirrors the illogicality found throughout the story. All of Wonderland's illogical elements, in turn, parallel illogical aspects of society. Wonderland is a version of Victorian society - simply turned on its head and shaken up - and therefore has many elements that reflect those of real life. A careful and thoughtful reading brings these correspondences to the surface. If parallels to all of the layers of the mouse's tale are to be found in the rest of the novel, we may need to look even deeper. The tale has yet another layer of wordplay. This

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layer is so hidden that it was not discovered until quite recently. As explained by Gary Graham in 1991, if each stanza of the poem is written out in conventional form, the poem falls into the form that is called a "tail-rhyme." This form of verse consists of stanzas made up of a couplet followed by another line of a different length. Usually, the third line is shorter than the lines of the couplet. However, in the stanzas of the mouse's tale the third line is longer than the previous two lines. This causes each stanza to represent a mouse: the couplet is the mouse's body and the extra-long third line visually forms its tale: "Fury said to the mouse, That he met in the house, 'Let us both go to law: I will prosecute you.'" Thus Carroll imbeds yet another layer of pun into the poem. This discovery hints at the possibility of more, subtler, and possibly still undiscovered layers of wordplay that might lie beneath the surface of other parts of the story - for, if Carroll did it here, certainly he could have done so throughout the book. The mouse's tale, like the entire book, can be read and understood at multiple levels. Alice, like many children, only sees the enticing, entertaining and silly level. In fact, we can be certain that she only sees this level in the mouse's tale, for when the mouse claims that she hasn't been paying attention she asserts that she has, and attempts to prove it by saying that he was at "the fifth bend" of the story (25). The mouse has indeed reached the part of his poem at which the words in Alice's mind begin to make their fifth curve down the page. Alice (and perhaps some readers as well) is too blinded by Carroll's exterior playfulness to see past this level of both the mouse's tale and the entirety of her adventures in Wonderland. A more careful reading of the mouse's poem and a consideration of its meaning - in other words, a look beyond Carroll's brilliantly painted facade of appealing and enticing fun and games that

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ropes in the reader- opens up a treasure trove of more serious and subversive meanings within the tale, which are analogous to those found when peeling back the sugary layers that coat the entire story. Works Cited Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992. Graham, Gary. as cited in *New York Times*, 1 May 1991 B1. as cited in Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992. p 25. The Mouse's Tale " Fury said to a mouse, That he met in the house, `Let us both go to law: I will prose- cute you.- Come, I'll take no de- nial: We must have the trial; For really this morn- ing I've nothing to do.' Said the mouse to the cur, `Such a trial, dear sir, With no jury or judge, would be wast- ing our breath.' `I'll be judge, I'll be jury,' said cun- ning old Fury: `I'll try the whole cause, and con- demn you to death.'"(25)